

### FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

#### 1. What happened to VDOT's I-81 studies from the 1990s?

Some of the information from those studies was updated and incorporated into the current Tier 1 environmental review. Topics included the feasibility of widening to the inside or outside of the existing road, interchange improvements, and preserving the region's natural beauty. From these studies, the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) formed priorities for I-81 and began to fund them in the Six-Year Improvement Program. Priorities were: completing a location study on the possible separation of I-77/I-81 overlap at Wytheville; designing and constructing new lanes from Salem to Botetourt County; and planning and designing future improvements at Harrisonburg and Winchester. Some preliminary engineering work got under way on each of these. However, there never was enough money identified to build these priorities, and they were removed from the Six-Year Improvement Program.

#### 2. What happens after the public hearings? What comes next?

The public comment period stays open through April 29, 2006. After that, Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) staff will compile all the comments received and consider them along with the findings of the Tier 1 Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) in making a recommendation to the CTB. A recommendation may include selection of a build concept to advance, prioritization of Tier 2 studies, continuation of the tolling application, and/or other options. Public comment will play an important role in forming a recommendation.

If a build concept is advanced, then VDOT will complete a Tier 1 Final EIS and submit it to the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). The FHWA will review the EIS and issue a Record of Decision (ROD) on the Tier 1 as appropriate. The ROD would allow VDOT to proceed with more detailed Tier 2 environmental studies on selected I-81 projects.

#### 3. Is I-81 going to be tolled?

We do not know yet, although tolling could be a source of funding. In Virginia, the CTB has authority to collect tolls and set toll rates. But before the CTB can make decisions on tolling I-81, they must give direction on what, if anything, to build. If a build concept is advanced, then the CTB would assess available funds, and they may or may not decide to continue pursuing tolls as a funding source. VDOT is gathering public input about tolling I-81 in order to provide it to the CTB for use in making this decision.

In 2003, VDOT submitted an application to toll I-81 to the FHWA. The application received conditional approval, contingent on fulfilling additional requirements. One requirement is the completion of the Tier 1 EIS, which includes a brief study on how traffic might be diverted from I-81 to other roads if there were tolls on I-81. The numbers show that although some traffic would use other roads, there still would be enough traffic on I-81 for tolling to be a viable source of funds to build improvements. Current Virginia law allows tolls on I-81 only on trucks.

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#### **4. Can't we put the trucks on rail and eliminate the need for more lanes?**

The Tier 1 study considered rail improvements. Four rail concepts were evaluated for their potential to take freight off I-81. Results show only building rail improvements does not eliminate the need for more lanes on I-81 because traffic will double in the next 30 years. Even if we could put all the trucks on rail, there still will be more than 75,000 passenger vehicles per day in many areas in 2035. That means I-81 will look like Thanksgiving weekend all year long.

#### **5. What is the status of negotiations with STAR Solutions?**

Negotiations continue and could lead to an agreement to do business together. Negotiations never have included specific design of highway improvements because potential improvements must be supported by the findings of the Tier 1 study. The CTB and FHWA will decide what may or may not be built on I-81. Any graphic or pictorial representations of a STAR plan for I-81 are ideas only. There is no timetable for negotiations with STAR, and no agreement has been signed.

#### **6. How many lanes are you building? What will I-81 look like?**

No decisions have been made about how I-81 will look or function in the future. Those decisions are up to the CTB and FHWA. In making the decision, the CTB will consider public opinion as well as the many concepts that were studied in the Tier 1 Draft EIS. Concepts included adding a variable number of lanes in each direction, adding lanes for trucks only, making various rail improvements, making spot improvements and many other concepts. The CTB also will consider the amount of traffic projected to use I-81 in 2035. This study determined that an average of 88,400 vehicles per day is expected to use I-81 in 2035, with much higher volumes in urban areas. More details are included in the Tier 1 Draft EIS.

#### **7. When will construction begin?**

People won't see bulldozers any time soon. Decisions made by the CTB will provide further direction to VDOT and possibly to the Department of Rail and Public Transportation to address future needs of I-81. In the meantime, we continue to make safety improvements and perform routine maintenance as funds allow. Examples are the current projects to replace the old bridges over the Maury River and Buffalo Creek in Rockbridge County. These bridges needed to be replaced, and we will be able to construct a northbound climbing lane as part of the Maury River bridge project, but this work does not add capacity to existing I-81.

As funds are available and projects are programmed by the CTB, VDOT will continue to make safety improvements and bridge repairs and replacements to existing I-81.